

## Will Impeachment Change Our Political System? Well ... Maybe, Say AU Professors

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Alfred, NY -- Some Americans compare a presidential impeachment with a hurricane, a major storm that ravages the landscape and destroys lives and livelihoods. Others view it as a passing shower that barely calls for an umbrella. In interviews this week, three Alfred University professors talked about how the impeachment process might change the American political system, regardless of whether the Senate convicts Clinton and regardless of whether he serves out his term. Dr. Gary Ostrower, professor of history, is a political moderate. Dr. Robert Heineman, professor of political science, is a conservative, and Dr. Stuart Campbell, professor of history, said Riconoclast describes him fairly well. "People don't have a lot of interest in the process," Ostrower said. "For a large segment of the population, polls say their interest ranges from mild to none. If this is so, I'm not sure the affair will have much importance in the long run." "If the president is removed from office, Al Gore will become president. Things will go on, as they did in 1974 when Nixon resigned and Ford became president ... I'm not sure Clinton's resignation or removal will weaken the presidency." But it will send the message that a President who violates the law -- any law -- runs a real risk, he said. HEINEMAN agreed that regardless of its outcome, impeachment will weaken the presidency. But he thinks it should be weakened. "We have here a conflict between fundamental forces in American society - a population that opposes more government and higher taxes, versus a Beltway mentality that thinks government can solve most of our problems." That mentality is an anachronism, Heineman said, "a vestigial legacy from the Cold War and the centralization of power that was necessary then. Now that the Cold War has dissipated, the (need) for that kind of government is gone, and the Clinton people don't recognize it yet ... The impeachment is a fruition of these differences across the country." In fact, he said, the presidency has already been weakened. "Government at the national level will increasingly be in the shadow of the states. That's an inevitable trend, given the lack of big foreign threats. From my perspective, the long-range consequences of impeachment could be good ... The states (may) become more important and have more opportunity to deal with our problems." CAMPBELL says the results of impeachment will likely be mixed. The detailed public discussion of President Clinton's sexual encounters will lower the bar on what's permissible to talk about -- and to do openly, he said. "It's likely to lead to less hypocrisy, less expectation that presidents should behave ... in a righteous and puritanical fashion." Our political leaders have always had illicit affairs: Eisenhower had a mistress during the war, President Kennedy conducted many liaisons, Johnson was a womanizer, and even Rep. Henry Hyde -- "Mr. Family Values," Campbell called him -- had a long affair with a married woman whose marriage ended as a result. But these affairs were not openly acknowledged. Perhaps Clinton's impeachment will reduce lying about sex, he said. "But the Republicans have also lowered the bar on the impeachability of presidents," Campbell said. "Now a precedent has been set that if one party controls Congress and the president belongs to the other party, impeachment is a way to topple him ... This legislative coup will significantly change the balance of power. That's a serious matter -- for better or for worse, depending on whether you think the United States should move in a parliamentary direction." All three professors agreed that impeachment is a political process. "Politics and justice have virtually nothing to do with one another," Campbell noted. That's why we have an independent judiciary that acts within the context of clearly drawn definitions, specific charges, and carefully weighed evidence. None of this exists in the Clinton case because it's a political trial. "The affair shows what can happen when one's political enemies become one's judges ... which again points up the importance of an independent judiciary," he said. THE IMPEACHMENT of a president usually starts as a political maneuver, but politics may evolve into justice, Ostrower said, and our two-party system is the key. "There have been presidents who have committed more serious crimes and never faced impeachment -- Ronald Reagan, for instance, when he authorized violating the Boland amendment prohibiting American aid to the Nicaraguan contras, including (money raised) by sending arms to Iran. If I'm correct in saying that was an impeachable offense, it simply suggests that Congress is not terribly consistent in applying impeachment law." Congress did not cite Reagan for impeachable violations -- but for political, not legal, reasons," Ostrower said. The impeachment charges against Richard Nixon, on the other hand, began in a partisan fashion but evolved toward bipartisanship as one Republican after another defected. "Had the impeachment case remained partisan, you can bet your life Nixon would not have resigned," Ostrower added. As a political phenomenon, the impeachment of Bill Clinton parallels the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, Heineman said. "Reconstruction statutes, favored by the radical Republicans, were adopted over Johnson's vetoes. They were going to punish the South. Johnson's approach to the former Confederacy was much more lenient." In other words, the party in power disliked Johnson's policies -- and

impeachment was the result. Campbell said, "One effect has been a trivialization of impeachment. It has lost its seriousness. The public clearly reads it as what it so obviously is: a partisan exercise." That trivialization helps account for public indifference to the Capitol show. It also masks a serious effect. "One party will be able to ramrod things through," he said. "Clearly the founding fathers did not want impeachment used that way." But Ostrower said a look at history should be reassuring. "In 200-plus years, many emotional issues have touched Americans," he said. There was the national bank during the Jacksonian period, the Free Silver issue in the 1896 election, the conflict over American participation in the League of Nations after World War I... "I think a cool examination will show that both the proponents and the opponents exaggerated the potential negative consequences in each of these issues, and others," he said. "The Republic did not fall apart. It's sturdier than many partisans would like us to believe." NOTE: For comment or clarification, Ostrower can be reached at (607) 871-2999 (e-mail: [ostrower@bigvax.alfred.edu](mailto:ostrower@bigvax.alfred.edu)); Campbell at (607) 871-2217 or 871-2701 (e-mail: [fcampbell@bigvax.alfred.edu](mailto:fcampbell@bigvax.alfred.edu)); and Heineman at (607) 871-2215 or 871-2870.